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Review of *Ritual Ground: Bent's Old Fort, World Formation, and the Annexation of the Southwest* By Douglas C. Comer

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Ritual Ground: Bent's Old Fort, World Formation, and the Annexation of the Southwest. By Douglas C. Comer. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Maps, photographs, notes, index. xiii + 321 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Douglas Comer, archaeologist with the National Park Service, offers unique interpretations about the relationships among Anglo, Hispanic, and Indian Americans at Bent's Fort on the north bank of the Arkansas River during the 1830s and 1840s in southeastern Colorado. Long on theory and short on fact, much

of this volume is developed from speculation rather than solid evidence. It is more about the importance of ritual than the history of Bent's Fort.

Comer argues that various rituals, including those traditional to the cultures involved and those developed to enhance their trade relations, help explain Bent & St. Vrain Company's economic success. This seems plausible even though evidence offered is meager. Rituals develop to govern most human relationships, but the examples Comer presents to support this claim are drawn from other cultures and eras with little or no relevance to Bent's Fort.

Comer concludes that Bent's Fort introduced capitalism and inspired other changes that made Anglo conquest of the Indians and the Hispanic Southwest easier than it otherwise would have been. A stronger case could be made for the commerce that passed over the Santa Fe Trail playing a more significant part in that transformation.

Some theories and speculations tax the credulity of serious scholars. It requires an enormous stretch, for example, to see ceremonial similarities between the rituals at Bent's Fort and the symbolism of English gardens in eighteenth-century Annapolis, Maryland (186-189). The history presented of Bent's Fort and environs, based largely on secondary sources, contains errors of fact and interpretation. Some of the premises are false.

No evidence is cited to support the conjecture that Bent's Fort "encouraged raids" by Indians on New Mexican settlements, resulting in "destabilization" of that province which "helped pave the way" for US conquest in 1846. The same is true of the contention that Indian resistance to Anglo traders "peaked in the 1820s" and "diminished" in the 1830s because of Bent's Fort.

The Santa Fe trade was not "almost entirely connected with Bent's Old Fort," nor was the fort the "agency by which all this [trade and conquest] was accomplished." The Santa Fe Trail is confused with the Oregon Trail in Wyoming (228).

This reviewer has visited Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site more than a dozen times and cannot imagine how anyone could conclude that "the layout of the fort resembled in some ways the medicine lodge or tepee with sacred associations to the Plains Indians" (207). The final chapter looks at rituals at the reconstructed fort. This volume contains some intriguing theories, but the proof is mostly inadequate or inaccurate.

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